

IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS

BY BRET HARTE

CHAPTER I.

It was very dark and the wind was increasing. The last rust had been preceded by an ominous roaring down the whole mountain side, which continued for some time after the trees in the valley and had lapsed into silence. The air was filled with faint, cool, sodden odor—as of stirred forest depths. In those intervals of silence the darkness seemed to increase in proportion and grow almost palpable. Yet out of this silence and soundness void now came the tickle of a spider's rowels, the dry crackling of a snare-leather, and the muffled plunge of a horse in the thick carpet of dust and desiccated leaves. A voice, which in spite of its muffled-of-fact reality, the obscurity lent a certain mystery to, said:

"I can't make out anything! Where the devil have we got to, anyway? It's as black as Tophet here ahead!"

"Strike a light and make a fire with something," returned a second voice. "Look where you're moving—now—keep your horse off, will you?"

There was more muffled plunging, a silence, the rustle of paper, the quick spurt of a match, and then the lifting of a flickering flame. But it revealed only the heads and shoulders of three horsemen framed within a nebulous ring of light that still left their horses and even their lower features in impenetrable shadow. Then the flame leaped up and died out with a few zigzagging sparks that were falling to the ground, when a third voice—that was low, but somewhat pleasant in its cadence—said:

"Be careful where you throw that. You were careless last time. With this wind and the leaves like tinder you might send a furnace blast through the woods."

"Then, at least we'd see where we were."

Nevertheless he moved his horse, whose tramping hoofs beat out the last fallen spark. Complete darkness and silence again followed. Presently the first speaker continued:

"I reckon we have to stay here till the next squall clears away the scud from the sky. Hello! What's that?"

Out of the obscurity before them appeared a faint light, a dim but perfectly defined square of radiance—which, however, did not appear to illuminate anything around it. Suddenly it disappeared.

"That's a horse—it's a light in the window," said the second voice.

"Horse nothing!" returned the first speaker. "A house with a window on Canyon road is fifteen miles from anywhere! You're crazy!"

Nevertheless from the muffled plunging and thinking that followed, they seemed to be moving in the direction where the light had appeared. Then there was a pause.

"There's nothing but a rocky crop-land here, where a house could stand and the trail again," said the first speaker, impatiently.

"Stop—there it is again!"

The same square light appeared once more, but the horsemen had evidently diverged in the darkness, for it seemed to be in a different direction. But it was more distinct, and as they gazed a shadow appeared upon its radiant surface—the face of a man in a human form. Then the light suddenly went out, and the face vanished with it.

"It is a window, and there was some one in it," said the second speaker, emphatically.

"It was a woman's face," said the pleasant voice.

"Whoever it is, just bail them, so that we can get our bearings. Slug out, altogether!"

The three voices rose in a prolonged shout, in which, however, the distinguishing quality of the pleasant voice was sustained. But there was no response from the darkness beyond. The shouting was repeated after an interval with the same result; the silence and obscurity were unbroken.

"Let's get out of this," said the first speaker, angrily. "Houses or no houses, man or woman, we're not wanted, and we'll make nothing waiting round here."

"Hush!" said the second voice. "S-sh-h! Listen!"

The leaves of the nearest trees rustled audibly. The sound of a sudden yielding of the trunks of the taller ferns into their faces, and laid the thin, lithe whips of alder over their horses' flanks sharply. It was followed by the distant sea-like roaring of the mountain side.

"That's a little more like it!" said the first speaker, joyfully. And look! There's a lightening up over the trail we came by."

There was indeed a faint glow in that direction like the first suffusion of dawn—permitting the huge shoulder of the mountain above whose slopes they had been journeying, to be distinctly seen. The sodden breath of the stirred forest depths was slightly tainted with an arid fum.

"That's the north you threw away two hours ago," said the pleasant voice, deliberately. "It's caught the dry brush in the trail round the bend."

"Anyhow, it's given us our bearings," said the first speaker, with satisfied accents. "We're all right now. And the wind's lifting the sky ahead there. Forward, now, all together, and let's get out of this hell-hole while we can."

It was so much lighter that the bulk of each horseman could be seen as they moved forward together. But there was no change in the obscurity on either side of them. Nevertheless the profile of the horseman with the pleasant voice seemed to be occasionally turned backward, and he suddenly checked his horse.

"There's the window again!" he said.

"Look—there! It's gone again."

"Let it go!" returned the leader.

"Come on."

The three spurred on in silence. It was not long before the wayside trees began to dimly show space between them, and the ferns to give way to lower, thick-set shrubs, which in turn yielded to a velvety moss, with long, quiet intervals of netted and tangled grasses. The regular fall of the horses' feet became a more rhythmic throbbing. They suddenly singled out and rang out sharply on stone, and the first speaker reined in slightly.

"Thank the Lord, we're on a ridge now!" and the rest in easy. "Well, boys, now we're all right. I don't mind saying that I didn't take no stock in that blasted light down there. If there ever was a will-o'-the-wisp on a square up mountain—that was one. It wasn't no window. Some of ye thought ye saw a face, too, Eh?"

"Yes, and a rather pretty one," said the pleasant voice, meditatively.

"That's the way they'd build that sort of thing, of course. It's lucky ye had to satisfy yourself with looking at it! I feel creepy yet, thinking of it! What are you looking back for now, like Lot's wife? Blamed if I don't think that face bewitched ye."

"I was only thinking about the fire you started," said the other, quietly. "I don't see it now."

"Well, if you did."

"I was wondering whether it could reach the hollow."

"I reckon that hollow could take care of any material fire that came down it, though, and go two better every time! Why, I don't believe

game's up, that we handed in our checks and left the board."

There was another silence around the fire, another whirl and turmoil without. There was no attempt to combat the opinions of their leader; possibly the same sense of disappointed hopes was felt by all, only they preferred to let the man of greater experience voice it. He went on:

"We've had our little game, boys, ever since we left Hawkins a week ago; we've had our ups and downs; we've been starved and parched, snowed up and half-drowned, shot at by road agents and horse thieves, kicked by agents and played with by grizzlies. We've had a heap of fun, boys, for our money, but I reckon the pic nic is about over. So we'll shake hands to-morrow all round and call it square, and go on our ways separately."

"Collinson," said Uncle Dick, after a lie! That she ran away with the man that was fetchin' her out; three thousand miles and three weeks with another man upsets some women. But he knows nothing about it, only he sometimes kinder goes off looney like, thinking of her." He stopped; the heads separated. Collinson had appeared at the doorway, his melancholy patient apparently unchanged.

"Grab on gentlemen; sit by and eat."

The humble meal was despatched with zest and silence. A few interjunctive remarks about the uncertainties of prospecting only accented the other pauses. In ten minutes they were out again by the fireplace with their lit pipes, and there were only three chairs, Collinson stood beside the chimney.

"Collinson," said Uncle Dick, after



"THERE AIN'T THE GHOST OF A SILVER INDICATION ANYWHERE."

"And what do you think you'll do, Uncle Dick?" said his close-shaven companion listlessly, as he well knew you know that we're dead broke. We've been living for the last few weeks on Preble Key's loose change—and that's gone. We've got to make a little account and damage stand over."

Collinson's brow slightly contracted, without, however, altering his general expression of resigned patience.

"Did you mean to say that you're sorry for myself, too, you see, I reckon on going over to Skinner's tomorrow and get a pork barrel and vote for Mexico and the wagon road. But Skinner can't let me have anything more until I've paid suthin' on account, as he calls it."

"Collinson," said the pleasant voice, abruptly, "who lives in the hollow this side of the divide, about two miles from the first spur above the big canyon?"

"Nary soul."

"Are you sure?"

"Sartin! That ain't no one but me better Bald Top and Skinner's—twenty-five miles."

"Of course you'd know if any one had come there lately?" persisted the pleasant voice.

"I reckon. It ain't a week ago that I tramped the whole distance that you fellows just rode over."

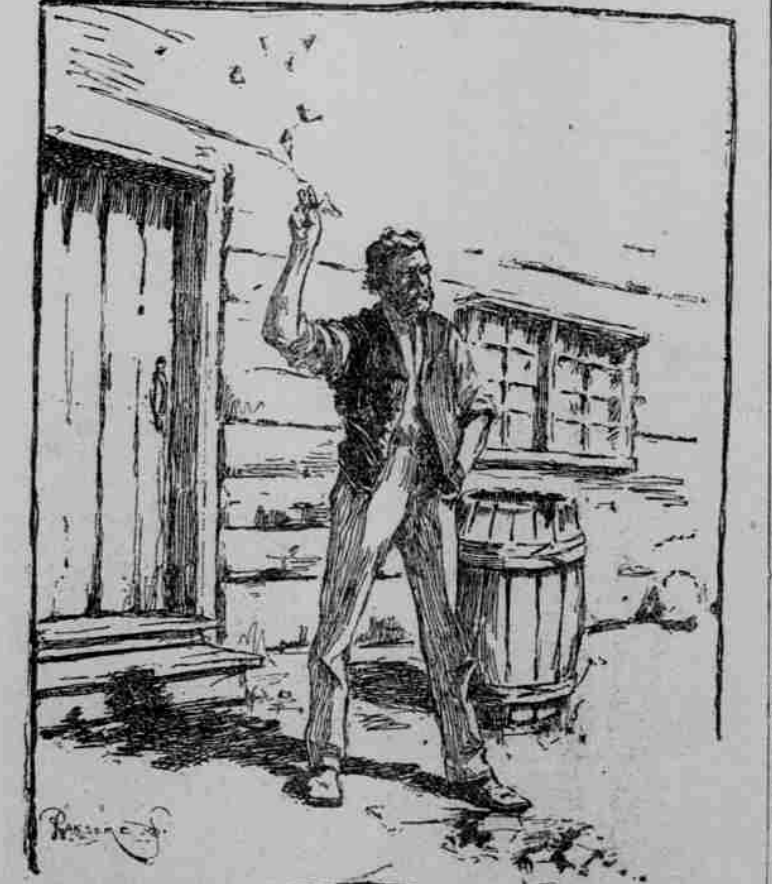
"There ain't," said the leader, deliberately, "an enchanted castle or cabin that goes waiting round the road with revolving windows and fairy princesses looking out of 'em?"

But Collinson, recognizing this as purely irrelevant humor, with possibly a trap or pitfall in it, moved away from the fireplace without a word, and retired to the adjoining kitchen to prepare supper. Presently he reappeared.

"The pork barrel's empty, boys, so I'll hev to fix ye up with jerked beef, potatoes, and flapjacks. Ye see, that ain't suthin' but over from Skinner's store for a week."

"All right; only hurry up," said Uncle Dick, cheerfully, settling himself back in his chair. "I reckon to turn in as soon as I've rustled with your hash, for I've got to turn out again and be off at sun-up."

They were all very quiet again, so quiet that they could hear the rustle of the sound of Collinson's preparations for their supper had ceased. Now, Uncle Dick arose softly and walked to the kitchen door. Collinson was sitting before a small kitchen stove, with a



"IT WAS ONLY THE TORN FRAGMENTS OF PARKER'S DRAFT."

fork in his hand, gazing abstractedly before him. At the sound of his guest's footsteps he started, and the noise of preparation recommenced. Uncle Dick returned to his seat, and said to the leader, leaning toward the chair of the close-shaven man, he said in a lower voice:

"He was off again?"

"What?"

"Thinkin' of that wife of his."

"What about his wife?" asked Key, lowering his voice also.

The three men's heads were close together.

"When Collinson fixed up this mill he sent for his wife in the States," said Uncle Dick, in a half whisper, "waited a year for her, hanting around and boarding every emigrant wagon that came through the pass. She didn't come—only the news that she was dead. He paused and nudged his still closer—the heads were almost touching. "They say over in the bar"—his voice had sunk to a complete whisper—"that it was

sumed to have ended. But Collinson did not glance in the direction of Parker for the rest of the evening, and, indeed, standing with his back to the chimney, more than once fell into that stolid abstraction which was supposed to be the contemplation of his absent wife.

From this silence, which became infectious, the three guests were suddenly aroused by a furious clattering down the steep descent of the mountain—along the trail they had just ridden. It came near, increasing in sound, until it even seemed to scatter the fine gravel of the river bed against the sides of the house, and then passed in a gust of wind, and the roof and roared in the chimney. With one common impulse the three travelers rose and went to the door. They opened it to a blackness that seemed to stand as another and an iron door before them. But to nothing else.

"Somebody went by then," said Uncle Dick, turning to Collinson. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Nary," said Collinson, patiently, without moving from the chimney.

"What in God's name was it then?"

"Only some of them boulders you loosed coming down, I reckon, and go with them for days after. When I first came here I used to start up and rush out into the road—like as you would—scolding and scolding—after folks that never was there and never went by. Then it got kinder monotonous, and I'd lie still and let 'em slide. Why, one night, I'd a sworn that some of 'em pulled up with a yell and shook the door. But I sort of allowed to myself that whatever it was, it wasn't wantin' to eat drink or sleep, or it would come in—and I hadn't any of no kind of defense. And in the mornin' I found a rock as big as that box lyn' chocka-block agin the door. Then I knowed I was right."

Preble Key remained looking from the door.

"There's a glow in the sky over Big Canyon," he said, with a meaning glance at Uncle Dick.

"Saw it an hour ago," said Collinson. "It must be the woods afire just round the bend above the canyon. Whoever it is to Skinner's better give it a wide berth."

Key turned towards Collinson as if to speak, but apparently changed his mind, and presently joined his companions, who were rolling themselves in their blankets, in a series of wooden bunks or berths, ranged as in a ship's cabin, around the walls of a room, which threw flickering and gigantic shadows of the faces, and of the three empty chairs, on the one knew or seemed to care where—

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